

## Review of *Being Property Once Myself: Blackness and the End of Man* by Joshua Bennett (Harvard University Press)

by Sohum Pal | Book Reviews, Issue 10.1 (Spring 2021)

**ABSTRACT** Reading a robust archive of twentieth and twenty-first century African-American literature, Joshua Bennett's *Being Property Once Myself: Blackness and the End of Man* lays the foundations for rethinking kinship and relation between humans and animals.

**KEYWORDS** animal studies, Black studies, ecocriticism, literature

*Being Property Once Myself: Blackness and the End of Man*. By Joshua Bennett. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2020, 224 pp. (hardcover). ISBN 978-0-6749-8030-3. US List: \$35.00.

Joshua Bennett's *Being Property Once Myself: Blackness and the End of Man* takes as its point of departure Frederick Douglass' injunction—in Douglass' autobiography and in later writings—for “recently emancipated black farmers...to consider animals their co-laborers, friends, partners in the field, to resist the whims of a social order predicated on their confinement” (3). That “their confinement” lacks a clear grammatical antecedent is precisely the point: in Douglass's vision, as in Bennett's, Black confinement and animal confinement are of the same genre. Over six chapters—“Horse,” “Rat,” “Cock,” “Mule,” “Dog,” and “Shark”—Bennett works to “abolish the forms of anti-Black thought that have maintained the fissure between human and animal,” and to illuminate the animal in Black American literature as a figure who promises “nothing short of another cosmos” (4).

Following the introductory engagement with Douglass in “Horse,” Bennett proceeds to take up twentieth-century works. In the first chapter, “Rat,” Bennett spends considerable time clearing away earlier criticism that seeks to equate animal life—and Black life—with hopelessness and social death in Richard Wright's poetry and the novel *Native Son*. Bennett quotes James Smethurst and Sam Bluefarb, offering historiographic context to animal-centered critique of *Native Son*, but suggests that earlier critics have relied on “a depiction of black social life broadly construed that evacuates all potential for flourishing due to material conditions, a logic by which the ‘ghetto’ that both Smethurst and Bluefarb invoke comes to serve as a zone of no return, a space in which nothing grows or grieves” (46). By contrast, Bennett sees the rat not as signifying bare life so much as life of an alternative order, modes of relationality and dignity-making that cannot be evident in a white world. This is, as Bennett suggests, the continuous thread of his study—readings that “account for the fugitivity that is immanent” in the figures of twentieth century African American literature, “even and especially when they are under extreme duress” (64).

Bennett's chapters each proceed by highlighting how the eponymous animal serves as an opening to another world and an invitation to rethinking the conditions of Black life. Along the way, Bennett expands on related questions: in "Cock," Bennett pairs Toni Morrison's *Song of Solomon* with the infamous Moynihan Report, assessing the different metaphors that pass for wisdom in describing the lives of Black men. The flightless, though noble, white (pea)cock in *Song of Solomon* walks with "an airborne strut that conveys pride while also operating as a performance of irreparable limitation," suggests Bennett; the peacock's whiteness indicates that the transcendence is no more possible for white men than it is for Black men (97). The following chapter, "Mule," offers a similar analytical frame for the labor, lives, and vulnerability of Black women, contending that "Muleness is inextricably linked to this sort of routine violation: the taken-for-granted suffering that occurs beyond the power or purview of social accountability" (117). In conversation with Hortense Spillers's "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe," Bennett reads the violence committed against the mule in Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God* as "vestibular" to America's culture of violence against Black women. At the same time, Bennett highlights how Spillers's "vestibular" indexes "myriad social possibilities that the flesh makes available to us, possibilities that the body cannot contain or condone," and offers a nexus for gathering human and animal subjects, for acknowledging the entanglement of human and non-human life, and for toppling the present species hierarchy (124). Inasmuch as these two chapters serve as Bennett's primary avenue of considering gender and ability, they do leave this reader somewhat wanting—Bennett glosses "the social model of disability" briefly, and primarily to foreclose a disability studies reading in his analysis of *Song of Solomon*. Nonetheless, the themes of capacity, gender, labor, and even the deathways Bennett writes of in "Mule" are rich potential areas for scholars of critical disability studies, ecocriticism, and animality to engage with Bennett's work going forward. After all, animals have historically offered an entrée into understanding ability.<sup>1</sup>

The fifth chapter, "Dog," looks to Jesmyn Ward's *Salvage the Bones* and Carl Phillips' poem "White Dog" to unsettle the master-dog relationship, to gesture to "an open relation that accounts for the dog's deep interiority," and moves away from "obedience" toward a more mutual recognition of human and dog willfulness (146). The dog's "freedom is bound up with the will of the speaker but is not reducible to it," argues Bennett (147). Encouraging "a marring of [species] distinctions rooted in white-supremacist anthropocentrism," (154) Bennett suggests that in abandoning species boundaries, there is a "flourishing that exceeds the reach and restrictions of modernity" (168) both for animal life and Black life.

Yet if the most of the book gestures towards kinship among humans and animals, the final chapter "Shark" seems to make an entirely different kind of intervention. Instead, sharks—particularly in the historical context of the slave ship—figure ambivalently. Always an attendant threat on the open sea, sharks "function as a kind of specter, both an ever-looming threat to the flourishing of black life and a release valve, a guaranteed exit" (177). The shark, standing in for the ocean itself, proffers "both otherworldly despair and fugitive possibility—uncharted, undercommon marronage made possible by the opacity of the oceanic realm" (178). As "Shark" concludes the book, it offers an ambivalent conclusion—a simultaneous gesture to Black fugitivity and the impossibility of leaving behind a white supremacist world. Bennett leaves this ambivalence unresolved, making space to consider what it is about the shark that renders it a figure for which the "fissure" between it and the human cannot be bridged, as the remainder of the book offers. Nonetheless, with *Being Property Once Myself*, Bennett continues to write new ground in eco-criticism, and guides readers in generative directions within the broad project of mapping a Black ecopoetics.

## Notes

1. See, for example, Sunaura Taylor, "Animal Crips" or Kelly Somers and Keren Soldatic, "Productive Bodies: How Neoliberalism Makes and Unmakes Disability in Human and Non-human Animals" in *Disability and Animality: Crip Perspectives in Critical Animal Studies*, eds. Stephanie Jenkins, Kelly S. Montford, and Chloë Taylor (New York: Routledge, 2020). [↗](#)
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## Author Information



### Sohum Pal

Sohum Pal (he/they) is an independent scholar living in New York City.

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### Article details

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